

## Africa Lead database (AID-OAA-TO-10-00045)

# Report on lessons learnt

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### INTRODUCTION

This project seeks to enhance and grow a database of short courses and Open Educational Resources (OER) offered by different institutions, which can be used to facilitate the on-going development of agricultural professionals, students and other stakeholders working in the agricultural sector. The Africa Lead Project which was initially implemented by Michigan State University was taken over by OER Africa which is at present hosting the database on a stand-alone server, for an African wide programme. OER Africa, together with RUFORUM is responsible for overseeing the updating of the database on a regular basis.

The database is being publicized widely not only to graduates of the Africa Lead Champions for Change courses but to many other high ranking personnel in government positions, faculty, non-governmental organizations and other interested persons. The Champions for Change programme seeks to build the capacity of agriculture leaders to prioritize activities and implement Regional and Country Agriculture Investment Plans within the CAADP framework. The database serves as a valuable resource that will ensure that some of the courses offered by Africa's and America's finest agricultural institutions will be rendered highly visible, to ensure their widespread dissemination and usage.

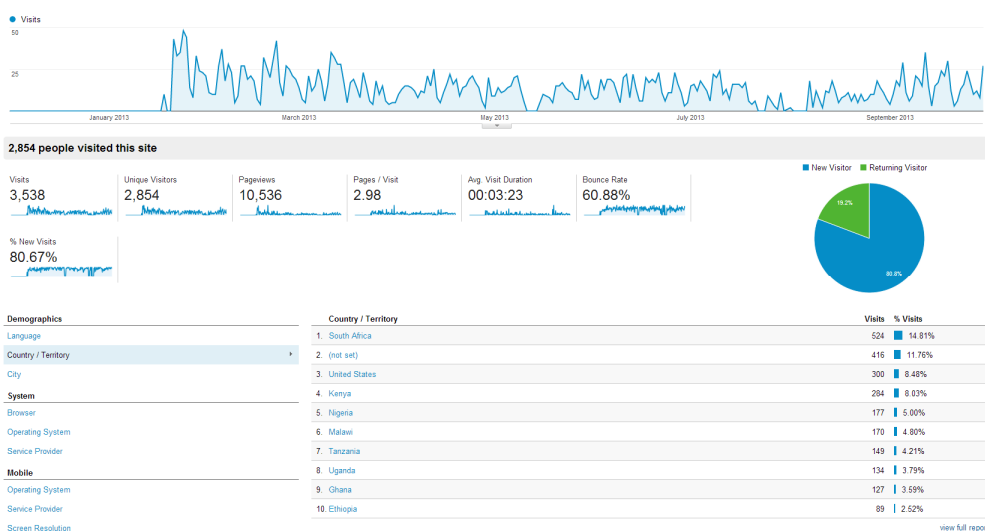
Beginning December 2012, *OER Africa* in conjunction with RUFORUM, the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture, trained staff and students at 19 universities across Eastern and Southern Africa (in Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Swaziland) in the use of the Africa Lead Database. This phase of the project aimed to introduce institutions to the database and to teach individuals there how to upload information about their course offerings and therefore increase their dissemination. A total of 25 institutions (in Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa) were invited to participate. Only the South African institutions targeted by the project were not members of RUFORUM.

The training component of the project was implemented over 3 months (December 2013 to February 2013) with very tight timeframes that resulted in a series of challenges that speak to some of the overall lessons learnt. These are discussed later on in this brief report. However, despite the challenges faced this aspect of the project was successfully completed and the database base

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continues to grow steadily. With regards to implementation at the institutions, challenges mostly had to do with access to the internet and the use of old and incompatible software and hardware, but in general the project was well received. The targeting of the right institutional staff members was found to be critical in ensuring buy-in and participation.

The graphic (a screen grab from the database) below gives an indication of some of the overall database statistics for the period 1 December 2012 to 30 September 2013.



It can be seen that over 3500 people have visited the database during the period 1 December 2012 to 30 September 2013 with 80.67% of the visits being first time ones and a return rate of 19.2%. The average visit duration was 3 minutes and 23 seconds. There is a bounce-rate of 60.88% which is rather high and needs further interrogation. The accessing of the database has been more or less consistent as shown by the graph above, however the number of courses newly uploaded at different times varied considerably with 444 being uploaded during the period December 2012 to February 2013, and then 93 and 131 new uploads over the next two time periods (March to June and then July to September 2013). The initial big difference in the new course uploads is probably due to the fact that the project team was actively involved in ensuring project milestones were achieved during the first time period. It was also the beginning of the academic year at many institutions and so they had their course offerings ready. Most visits to the site were from South Africa which may be linked to the fact that the top course providers are also from South Africa and Namibia.

Of the top 20 providers 8 are higher education institutions whilst the rest consist of other training organizations involved in development. The top 20 course providers can be seen from the database screen grab in table 1 below. The majority of these providers serve institutions and individuals situated on the African continent however there were some from other countries such as the United States of America, United Kingdom and Malaysia. The number of course providers has increased steadily from 151 to 192 over the ten month period from December 2012 to September 2013.

**Table 1: Details of the database's top 20 short course providers**

Institutions & Organizations		
	Institutions & Orgs	Courses Physical Location of Courses
1	Institute for Capacity Development (ICD)	57 Namibia, South Africa
2	Agricultural Research Council (ARC)	52 South Africa
3	RUFORUM	39 Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda
4	Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT)	22 Kenya
5	Mzuzu University	22 Malawi
6	Bindura University of Science Education	18 Zimbabwe
7	Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration	14 Ghana
8	Center for Development Excellence	12 Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania
9	Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation (CDI)	12 Burkina Faso, India, Netherlands, Philippines, South Africa
10	The Careers Guide	11 Australia, United States
11	Crown Agents	10 Nigeria, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom
12	MDF Training and Consultancy	9 Ghana, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom
13	University of Nairobi	9 Kenya, Uganda
14	Crown Agents International Development Specialists	8 Ghana, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom
15	Egerton University	8 Kenya, Uganda
16	Management Development and Productivity Institute	8 Ghana
17	MSU WorldTAP	8 United States
18	IFDC	7 Kenya, Malaysia, Tanzania, United States
19	JKUAT	7 Kenya
20	Safe Food Handlers Corporation	7 United States

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Table 2: Entry and vetting of Short Courses into the Africa Lead database since inception of this phase:

Period	Total courses available	No of courses newly published	No of organizations involved	No of website visits	No of page views	Duration of visit (minutes)	No of visitors from Africa
01 Dec 2012 – 28 February 2013	1138	444	151	902 (72.39% were new)	3534	5.04 minutes	570
01 March 2013 – 30 June 2013	1228	93	161	1608 (84.3% were new)	4292	2.48 minutes	1004
1 July 2013 – 30 September 2013	1359	131	192	1024 (82.8% new)	2697		

### Lessons learnt

Despite the challenges faced a lot was achieved within very tight and inflexible time-frames. However there are a few lessons learnt from the project that should be taken into consideration for the planning and implementation of future projects of this nature:

1. Not all African higher education institution staff had regular access to internet or laptops or up-to-date software and so alternative ways had to be used in training them to learn about and use the database. In this regard, a simulation (on-line and offline) was developed and used to show people how to use the database by projecting pictures via a data projector. CDs and a training pamphlet were disseminated to all participants to support them in accessing and using the database after the initial training.
2. A template to collect course information was also developed that could be filled in easily on one's computer using a word processing package or could be printed out for a person to complete manually, scan and submit. This sort of tool proved to be very useful when training at sites where connectivity and access to suitable hardware and software was limited.
3. It is important to *target the right people for the training* especially those tasked by their institutions to make their courses/programmes visible – in this way one contributes to ensuring the continuity, sustainability and growth of the database. At some institutions trainers felt that some of the beneficiaries sent for the

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training were not the right ones meaning that in the long run the institution would not benefit from the capacity being developed.

1. There were some challenges experienced in *identifying and getting permission for the right people to be trained* – in some instances the associated bureaucratic red-tape and hierarchical institutional protocol created bottlenecks, barriers and delays. These issues need to be taken into consideration up-front and also link directly to lesson 3 listed above
5. Institutions have times of the year when it is *difficult to involve staff (especially academic staff) in training because of heavy work commitments* as well as the inclusion of extended holidays – project implementation happened during such a period and academic staff (whilst interested) were not as keen to take the time off to engage properly with the training and advocacy interventions. This needs to be taken into consideration when looking at future project implementation - be it training, or general on-site advocacy.
6. Some *institutions were neither easily contactable nor accessible due to their geographical location*. Some thought has to be put into how best to reach and inform such institutions and get them to use and contribute to growing the database.
7. There is a *need for more flexibility or else lengthened project timeframes* to accommodate the inflexibility of the USAID travel regulations and the slow response times to travel permission requests – much as it is understood why they are necessary, one cannot then generally expect good project outcomes when working with higher education institutions that have their own particular time related challenges (as outlined in lessons 4 and 5 above – we were lucky that the partners had project members based in 3 different countries that somehow mitigated this challenge and introduced a slight element of flexibility.
8. Working with RUFORUM as a partner was extremely beneficial and facilitated easier identification of and access to the participating institutions and thus a better response was obtained from the RUFORUM member institutions as opposed to those that are not. Discussions held with the RUFORUM staff member that participated in institutional visits and training gave the following answers in response to the questions on the perceived *usefulness and sustainability of the database*:

**Question: In your opinion is the database useful?**

**Response:** *Yes. It is useful to RUFORUM and the network as a whole. It closely links to our Theory of Change by addressing one of our deliverables “Dynamic Platform for University Networking, Advocacy for Agricultural Higher Education”*

**Question: What is the relevance of promoting professional development through short courses among your member universities?**

**Response:** *The approach gives publicity to the ongoing short professional courses offered. The universities I visited had ongoing short courses that would be relevant for sharing within the network but had no central place to host or advertise the courses, nor was there someone to push this content/information online.*

*Secondly, RUFORUM is keen to see its member universities academic rankings increase. This can be partly achieved through the visibility of their course offerings online which then contributes to the improved the visibility of the network universities.*

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Thirdly, the RUFORUM secretariat holds short skills enhancement courses or retreats for its postgraduate students. The Africa Lead database could be used to enhance how RUFORUM delivers these courses. RUFORUM would then focus on packaging them so they are accessible and visible online.

**Question:** *Where do you think the database should best be positioned or situated?*

**Response:** *I think given that the database serves to promote the universities content/course offerings and improve service delivery it would be best hosted by RUFORUM. We at RUFORUM see ourselves as having a platform that fosters collaboration between its member institutions. This also speaks well to our need to fulfill the dissemination aspect to the network of institutions.*

**Question:** **How will what you have learned whilst implementing the project guide your work aimed at sustaining the database?**

**Response:** *Clearly, the database needs to be hosted and someone dedicated to improving its content on an ongoing basis to make sure the information about courses offered within the network is available online. This will require time and resources. Some course offerings only become available through physical visits to institutions and getting to understand whom to work with to get the relevant information online.*

**Question:** **How did the grant provide catalytic help?**

**Response:** *It enabled capacity building through enabling the online training sessions and the physical visits. The skills attained were helpful and I am sure the website statistics also speak to this.*

OER Africa team members are in agreement with these sentiments. The following section looks at some recommendations regarding the ways in which the database might be made sustainable.

## Sustainability of the database – some recommendations

There is a need to find a sustainable way of growing the database further (in a resource friendly way) through new course uploads and increasing the number of visits to it. This requires a multi-pronged approach.

1. Encouraging continued institutional course uploads by:
  - sending regular reminders to individuals that underwent training and where possible
  - strategically targeting other individuals such as librarians, university marketing and short learning programme staff by email and phone to help get the message out there and collect the information required.

This approach is likely to be more effective than trying to get academic staff members that are often extremely busy, to upload information on a regular basis.

2. Identifying and then directly marketing the database to short course service providers inviting them to either upload course information or provide hyperlinks to the relevant information.
3. Advertising information about the database:
  - In the quarterly *Saide* online newsletter.
  - other suitable online spaces such as OER Africa's AgShare and the RUFORUM websites as well as on
  - institutional intranets (where possible).

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4. Strategically piggy-backing some of the future Africa Lead training and advocacy at institutions to other project visits by the partners - to leverage existing resource synergies. Such an approach could contribute to more resource friendly continuous dissemination and advocacy about the database.
5. Employing someone to spend a bit of time each month to:
  - *Search for and upload new courses* of existing service providers on the database
  - *Finding new service providers* (institutions and others) over and above the targeted ones – getting permission to upload their courses. A suitable template for capturing course information has been designed for this purpose. It can be sent out to the identified service providers who are then invited to provide course details that are then uploaded.
  - *maintain the functionality of the database and its server*
  - *regularly keep track of course uploads and database hits*

This could possibly require additional financial resources however these costs could be paid for through cross-subsidization from related projects or aligning and embedding the database in either the OER Africa or RUFORUM spaces. However in order for this to be done in a sustainable way:

- The database could be converted to a more suitable platform that would make for easier administration and management. For example: right now it is a stand-alone database - on the Wordpress platform, and has limited tools. This platform differs from that of both OER Africa (Drupal) and the RUFORUM repository (AgriDrupal) – these platforms have tools that would improve the usability and visibility of the database.
  - If the database were moved to the RUFORUM or OER Africa web-spaces it would mean all the available Agriculture open education resources and the short course information could be accessed in one place. This would probably contribute to: *increased website functionality*, and *overall improved sustainability* as these two web spaces are visited regularly by various individuals. Linking it directly to the RUFORUM platform would be particularly strategic as RUFORUMs target beneficiaries are the same ones we would wish to use the database.
  - It has been estimated that such a conversion would take about 15 days. This would also be a cost-effective approach as the tools required are already in the system and would improve database functionality. This would mean the database is no longer a standalone, which is a challenge at present because it means maintaining a separate platform that needs an extra set of resources.
  - At present there is also a high bounce rate and the database is not found that easily – this is attributed to the way the landing page is designed. There is a need to *improve the look and feel of the landing page* to mitigate the bounce rate.
6. *Follow up contact and the provision of online and telephonic support of the staff at institutions* where training has taken place to encourage them to keep up with on-going course uploads (as the courses become available) or to submit the information so that they can be uploaded for them
  7. A *workshop training template* can be developed to support on-site training. This together with the *training simulation* designed to support staff involved in carrying out the database training can be circulated to those newly trained or introduced to the database, so that they can *continue training and provide support* at their institutions. These tools might need some revision if the database is shifted onto another platform.

## **Conclusion**

The database is useful and can definitely contribute to on-going professional development and capacity building. However, in order to encourage its continued growth there is a need to mitigate those factors that have been identified as impacting negatively on the database and its use. The lessons learnt and the recommendations made in this report can be used to further improve the database and contribute to its sustainability in the longer term.